NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

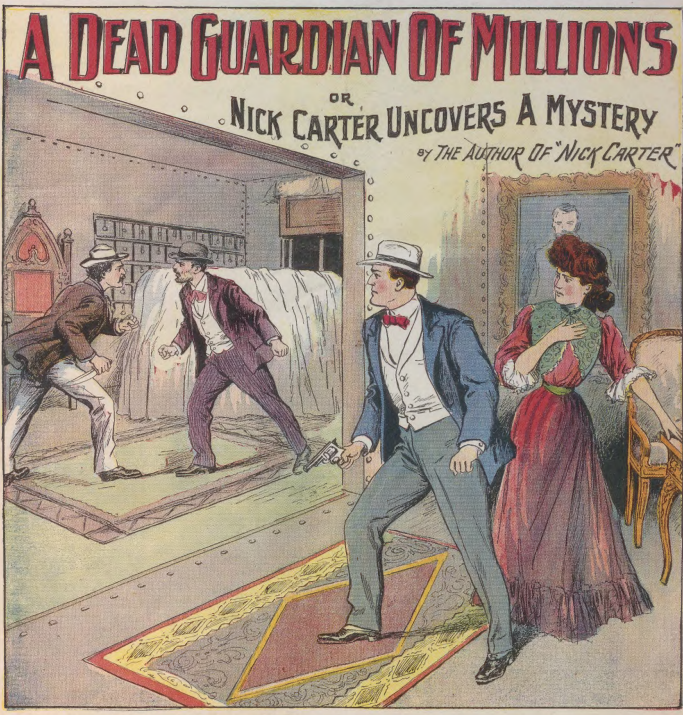
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 493 NEW YORK, JUNE 9, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

A DEAD GUARDIAN OF MILLIONS

OR, NICK CARTER UNCOVERS A MYSTERY

By THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



Nick Carter was interested in what was taking place before him. The two men in the third vault were talking violently in French, and in another instant they were engaged in a desperate struggle.

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A DEAD GUARDIAN OF MILLIONS;

OR,

Nick Carter Uncovers a Mystery.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHARM OF MIRIAM LEE.

"Miriam Lee, eh?" murmured Nick Carter, not at all conscious of the fact that he uttered the name aloud; but Chick, who sat opposite him at the breakfast table, looked up and smiled.

"What about Miriam Lee, Nick?" he asked.

The detective folded the letter he had been reading and replaced it in the envelope.

"Did I speak the name aloud?" he asked, smiling back at his assistant.

"It sounded very much like it."

"Then I have already betrayed the confidence she reposed in me, for she asks me please not to mention the fact that she has written to me until after I have seen her."

"I don't suppose, really, that I was included in that prohibition, was I? That is, I don't suppose she intended to include your official family, did she?"

"The letter sounds very much as if that is precisely what she did intend. However, I believe I should have told you about it, anyhow."

"Is it *the* Miriam Lee, Nick?"

"Yes. *The* Miriam Lee, no less, as your friend, Mike Finnigan, would say."

"Isn't she supposed to be the richest unmarried woman in New York?"

"I think, Chick, that she is *the* richest woman in New York, married or single; and I have heard, also, that she is among the most charming."

"Have you never seen her?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"She is quite young, isn't she?"

"Somewhere around thirty, I imagine, although that is pure guesswork on my part. She may be several years younger than that."

"What has happened to her? Has she been robbed?"

"She doesn't say. She merely requests that I call upon her at her home this morning at eleven, if I can make it

entirely convenient to do so, and if not, will I be so good as to send her a line by messenger, stating when I will oblige her. And she adds: 'I will regard it as a favor if you will not mention this request of mine to any person, at least until after our interview.'"

"Depend upon it, then, she has lost a necklace of diamonds, or a box of jewels, or——"

"I don't think so," Nick interrupted.

"I was about to add that in the end, one of the servants would be found guilty, and all that. She enjoins you to secrecy because of her distaste for notoriety; eh?"

"I don't think so."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I know something about Miriam Lee, although I have never to my knowledge seen her. I knew her father. I had two or three important cases for him before I found you, Chick, out in Nevada."

"That was a good while ago."

"It doesn't seem so long ago, when I stop to think about it. Old Burleigh Lee, her father, was a strange character. He married late in life, and was a very old man when I knew him."

"Tell me about him. It may refresh your memory when you go to call upon the daughter."

"He was an eccentric old chap, and nobody could even make a guess as to the number of millions he owned. He had his fingers knuckle deep in every financial transaction of any importance. He was never known to borrow money in the street or at a bank, and it was rumored that he always kept anywhere from one to ten millions dollars in *cash*, in his house."

"Nonsense, Nick!"

"I'm not so sure that it was nonsense, lad. As I have said, he married late in life, and lost his wife when Miriam was born. I think I was mistaken just now about her age, Chick. She cannot be much more than twenty-five. I know because she had just come of age at the time of her father's death, and that was approximately four years ago."

"And I suppose she inherited the entire fortune, eh?"

Nick Carter smiled across the table at his assistant.

"I can quote his will word for word," he said. "It created quite a sensation at the time. He drew it himself, and it was witnessed by two bankers who were personal friends of his—that is, as nearly personal friends as he ever permitted himself to have."

"What was it?"

"This: 'I, Burleigh Lee, hereby declare this to be my last will and testament. I give, devise, and bequeath all the property of any description that I die owning, to my daughter, Miriam Lee, and I hereby appoint my said daughter, Miriam Lee, sole executor of this will, without bonds.' That was all there was of the will, but it was enough. The attestation clause followed, of course, which the witnesses signed in his presence and in the presence of each other. You see, there were thousands of persons who believed that they would know something about the old man's affairs after his death—but he fooled them."

"And I suppose his daughter has kept on fooling them ever since, eh?"

"She has merely kept silent, that is all."

"But somebody has had to attend to his immense holdings for her."

"I believe that she has done it all herself. Her power is felt in the 'Street' now and then, in a quiet way, but not in the way that the old man used his. She never moves only to protect herself—and then she does it with an iron hand."

"And all this, I suppose, is what leads you to think that her letter refers to something of vastly more importance than the mere loss of jewels."

"Yes."

"I don't even know where she lives, Nick."

"She has always remained in the great mansion erected by her father years ago, on Washington Heights, when that section of the city was out in the country. It is a quaint old place, I have been told; more like a fortress than a mansion, and it stands in the middle of a large tract of land upon which the city has thus far never been permitted to encroach."

"You will know more about it when you return from making your call, eh?"

"I hope to do so, certainly. I think I will have out the Peerless, Chick, and go up there in that."

"Shall I act as chauffeur for you?"

The detective hesitated a moment before he replied, and then he said:

"Yes, Chick; I think you may."

And thus it happened that at precisely eleven o'clock, Nick Carter was ushered into the presence of Miriam Lee, popularly supposed to be the richest woman in New York.

She received him in a small room in one wing of the house which opened off from the library; a room which was entirely isolated from the rest of the house; a room to which there was no entrance save the one from the library, and where the windows were protected by heavy steel bars, as if the place were a safe-deposit vault.

Nick noticed in the instant of passing through the short entry from the library, that the doors were double, and that those which communicated directly with the room itself were made like the doors of a vault, and he had no doubt at that moment that they were also provided with combination, or even time-locks.

They were concealed by heavy plush curtains at the moment of his entrance, but his keen eyes were accustomed to seeing beyond such things—that is, to reading cause from effect, and hence his conclusion, which he later discovered to be correct.

Chick, of course, remained outside on the highway, in the Peerless, waiting.

It was the butler who admitted the detective to the mansion, and he conducted Nick in person to the presence of his mistress.

Miriam Lee rose from a revolving-chair at a huge, square, mahogany desk, and came forward with extended hand as he entered.

"It is very kind of you to respond so promptly to my note, Mr. Carter," she said. "I do not think we have met before, although I have seen you several times in my father's office. Will you select any chair which appeals to you?"

"Thank you," replied the detective. "Really, Miss Lee, I don't remember to have seen you at the office of your father."

She smiled brightly, and in that smile Nick understood why Miriam Lee was described as charming rather than beautiful.

"I said that I had seen *you,*" she said. "I think there were two or three occasions, possibly more, when you were there, that I was in the inner office. I suppose you will pardon me after all these years for having taken the opportunity to peek, as we used to say when children." And she went on rapidly, without giving him time to reply: "So you see I feel as if we were already acquainted."

"It is a very great pleasure to me to know that you do feel so, Miss Lee."

"There is still another reason, Mr. Carter, why I should class you as a friend, even."

"Indeed? May I ask what it is?"

"One of the last injunctions given to me by my father was this: 'Miriam, if the time ever comes when you must take any person into your confidence, or when you need the aid of a man's strength of will and purpose, go to Nick Carter. He is the only man I know, of whom I can say that, my daughter.'"

For a moment Nick did not speak, and there was absolute silence in the room. Then, with more emotion in his voice than his best friends would have believed he would reveal on any occasion, he replied:

"I shall never ask for higher praise, Miss Lee. It is the voice of a man four years in the grave that speaks to me through his daughter. Let us hope that I may always deserve his high opinion."

She saw that he was greatly moved, and she started from her chair, crossed the room, and opened a cabinet, from which she returned with a box of cigars in her hand.

"You will be very much more comfortable and at home, if you smoke, I know," she said. "There is wine in the cabinet also, if you care for it? No? Now, if you will draw your chair up to the fire—it is chilly outside, isn't it?—so; thank you. Now we shall be quite comfortable and cozy."

"You have certainly made me very pleasantly welcome," replied Nick, smiling, and noting at the same time the warm chestnut glow of her hair.

She had selected a low seat for herself, and had drawn it quite close to the fire that burned in the grate, for although it was in the last week of March the weather was still cold; and now she rested her chin on her hand and looked up at him smilingly.

"I suppose you are wondering all this time why I asked you to come here," she said.

"To tell you the truth," he replied, "I don't think it has occurred to me to wonder about it at all."

"I hope, then, that your time is not limited. I hope that you have no other immediate engagement, Mr. Carter?"

"I am entirely at your disposal so long as you desire my presence, Miss Lee."

"It is very good of you to say that, for it will take me a long time to tell you all that I wish to impart. Perhaps the entire day. Possibly we may not have finished then, and you will have to return to-morrow, and the next day, and many days thereafter. What do you say to that?"

"Precisely what I have already said. I am entirely at your disposal."

"My father was not mistaken. He believed that the time would come when I would need somebody, and he knew that you would be that person. Mr. Carter, I am literally enveloped in a mystery with which I can no longer contend alone. That is why I sent for you."

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTENTS OF THE THIRD VAULT.

The detective flicked the ashes from his cigar upon the red-hot coals in the grate, and then he replied:

"One might almost suppose that we were in the first pages of an exciting novel. It begins quite like a romance, doesn't it? And that reminds me that there is one person who is connected with this interview in rather an abstract way, who doubtless sees no romance about it."

"And who is that, pray?" demanded Miriam.

"My chief assistant, who acted as chauffeur in bringing me here. Will you permit me to send him away before we begin on the mystery? If I remember correctly the wind has a chill about it out there."

"By all means. Send him away at once."

"And at what time shall I direct him to return for me?"

"Tell him not to return at all. When the time comes for you to go I will send you home in one of my own cars."

She left her low chair long enough to press an electric

button, and then returned to it. In a moment the old butler appeared.

"Harrison," she said, "there is a man outside in charge of an automobile. This gentleman wishes you to take a message to him."

"Just say," added Nick, "that he is to return home and wait there for further orders, by telephone. That will do. Thank you, Harrison."

The butler disappeared, and Nick added:

"That is an interesting old chap, Miss Lee. I suppose he has been in the family a great deal longer than you have; eh?"

"Yes, indeed. Harrison served my father when they were both boys. I have no idea how old he is, for that is a secret of his own that he never reveals. But he is always faithful, and in many respects apparently as young and as spry as ever."

"And now, Miss Lee, shall we get down to the mystery?" asked Nick.

Miriam had resumed her former attitude, and instead of replying to his question directly, she raised her eyes to his, and asked:

"Have you any idea what sort of room you are in at this moment, Mr. Carter?"

"I strongly suspect," replied the detective, "that it is just such a room as safe-deposit vaults are made of."

She nodded her head in the affirmative, and continued:

"My father never told you about it, of course?"

"Never."

"This room, Mr. Carter, has been made as fire-proof, as burglar-proof, and as bomb-proof as combined steel and stone and cement could render it; and yet it does not bear that appearance to a casual observer."

"No, it does not; but you must remember that it is a part of my business to be a close observer. And again, I always suspected that such a room existed in this house."

"Mr. Carter, I am about to reveal to you a secret which has never been shared by another than my father and myself. I——"

"What! Do you mean to tell me that even old Harrison is not in the secret?"

"He is not, much as that statement may astonish you. He knows that this room exists, of course, and he is aware of its character; but he knows nothing whatever of the secrets connected with it. That is what I mean. The men who built this wing of the house and what is beneath it, were brought here by my father from all parts of the world, and each from a different part. When the work of one man was finished, he was sent home, and another, from a different quarter of the globe took his place. He in turn was replaced by another, and each particular set of craftsmen worked in rotation, if I may use the term as applied to them. You comprehend the result?"

"Partly."

"The result was that when this part of the building was finished there was not even an artisan in the world who knew what it was. It was my father's hobby. He told me that it cost him more than half a million dollars, and that he got more pleasure out of that half a million than from any dollars he had ever owned."

"But all this does not bring us to the mystery, Miss Lee."

"Yes, it does—presently. I am coming to that; but I must lead you up to it by easy stages."

"You mean that you do not intend to spoil a good story by an anticlimax," said the detective.

"I mean nothing of the sort. But you must follow me in my own way. It has been a great struggle for me to bring myself to the point of taking you into my confidence. I have been a long time thinking about it. Yesterday I reached a point of sending the note to you—and to-day, two seconds before you entered at that door, I had decided to send your away again with an apology."

"You changed your mind very suddenly, then—in two seconds," said Nick.

"I changed it the instant I saw you. The moment your hand touched mine I realized that I had done right in summoning you. When you entered at the door, it seemed to me almost as if my father came into the room with you."

"I perceive," said the detective gravely, "that this is really a very solemn occasion for you, Miss Lee."

"It is, indeed!" she replied; and for an instant there was a suspicion of tears in her gold-brown eyes.

They were both silent for some moments after that, but presently Miriam continued as if there had been no hiatus:

"Before we have done with this day's conference, I shall close and lock that door by which you entered. Next, I shall close the great doors of cast-steel, which really shut this wing off from the rest of the house. Those doors are like the great doors of a bank-vault. If there is any difference, these are the stronger."

"I noticed that they were there," said Nick.

"You did?"

"Rather let me say that I suspected it."

"I shall close them and lock them, for the mechanism of those doors can be worked from the inside as well as from outside. Next, I shall, one by one, close the three windows. Now, they appear like ordinary windows—from outside the house at least—but when closed they are as impervious as those steel doors that I just described to you."

"That, at least, is something that I did not suspect," murmured the detective.

"There are many things connected with this wing which you could not suspect," she replied.

"I am beginning to realize that."

"When that is done, we will stand together in a verita-

ble tomb—you will know later why I call it a veritable tomb. There will be four feet of steel, and stone, and cement between us and the outside world, and then, and then only, can I reveal to you the secrets of this wing of the house, which it is necessary that you should know in order to aid me."

"Whenever you are ready, Miss Lee."

"Oh, it will be hours before I shall be ready to do that. I have much to tell you first."

"May I ask you how you obtain ventilation in this room when everything is closed as you describe?" asked the detective.

"The ventilation is perfect. That is all that I need say on that point for the present, for I intend to show you the plans later."

"Then, having closed and, in effect, sealed the room, your next step will be to take me to the vaults beneath this room, I suppose?"

"Yes; and you did well to use the plural just then, for there are two of them, one under the other." She hesitated a moment, and then added slowly:

"In fact, there are three, but we need not mention the third at present."

"Why not?"

"Because it has nothing whatever to do with the reasons for your presence here."

"How do you know that?" insisted the detective. "It may have everything to do with them; the more so because you do not suspect it."

She shook her head.

"No; it is impossible," she said.

"Remember," said Nick, "that as yet you have given me no idea of the mystery itself."

"I remember. You do not believe in ghosts, do you, Mr. Carter?"

"Certainly not. You are much too sensible a woman to ask such a question."

"Then most assuredly that third vault can have nothing to do with the mysteries of this house."

"Being still in ignorance of the causes——" began the detective, but she interrupted as if she had not heard him, and continued:

"The body of my father rests in the third vault."

"What!" exclaimed the detective, half starting to his feet, and then sinking back again. "I thought——"

"You thought that it rested in the mausoleum at Woodlawn, did you not?"

"Yes."

"It was there—for a time. You remember doubtless—but possibly you did not know—that the body of my father was most perfectly embalmed. The highest art which that science has attained was applied to his remains, with the result that even now, after four years, he looks as if he were sleeping."

"Do you mean to tell me, Miss Lee, that you visit it?" demanded Nick, somewhat shortly.

"Once a year—yes," she replied calmly.

"You are a most remarkable young woman."

"It is necessary that I should do so in order to carry out his wishes, as I promised him I would do."

"There is just one discrepancy here, if you will permit me to say so, which I would like you to explain, Miss Lee," said the detective.

"Yes? What is that?"

"You have given me to understand that you and your father were the only living persons who were aware of the secrets of this wing. He being dead, that leaves you alone as the possessor of those secrets. I happen to know that the body of your father was deposited in the magnificent mausoleum he had built for himself and you at Woodlawn. Now, how could you possibly have taken that body from the mausoleum, have transferred it to this house, and finally have deposited it in what you are pleased to call the third vault under this room, without the knowledge and assistance of others?"

"It is a long story, Mr. Carter. I will not weary you with detail, but I will give you the substance."

"If you please."

"When my father had the mausoleum built he made arrangements with the authorities of the place that after a specified time they should assist in its removal secretly from the mausoleum to his yacht. He led them to understand that it was his wish that he should be buried secretly far out at sea. When this was done, I was, of course, in charge of the yacht. I was carrying out my father's wishes, and I did as he had directed. I had in my employ at that time a Hindu *ayah*, or maid servant, who had the misfortune to be blind, but who was otherwise efficient. Need I say more? Only a little.

"The casket was taken to the cabin of the yacht, and left there. The curtains were drawn. Two days later, when the casket was buried in the ocean, it did not contain the body of my father. That remained locked in his own stateroom aboard the yacht. Later it was brought to this house so secretly that even old Harrison did not suspect. I did not require much help once I had the body in this room, but what little I did require, the *ayah* gave me. Later, I settled a small fortune on her, and sent her back to India."

"I think," said the detective quietly "that I begin to see a glimmer of light about your mystery, even before you tell me what that mystery is."

"You refer to the *ayah*, I suppose, but you will dismiss that idea when you have heard what the mystery is," said Miriam. "You have no idea yet concerning that."

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY.

"It is true," continued Miriam, "that the entire mystery has to do with the strange desire of my father's that his body should finally rest in a vault which he had prepared for it, beneath this room where we are now seated; but the mystery itself—that which you are called here to assist me to explain—is something of which the *ayah* could not possibly have had any knowledge.

"In as few words as possible, now, I will explain.

"My father did not begin life as a poor boy; he inherited a fortune with which to begin a business career, and his aptitude in finances was so great that before he was thirty years old he was worth many millions, and was steadily increasing his wealth.

"He was fifty-five years old when I was born, and a very rich man. My mother died at my birth, and I at once became the pivot upon which every act of my father's revolved.

"He vowed then that he would continue to make money all his life, and that as long as he lived he would every year put aside one million dollars in cash for me. Do you understand that? One million dollars in cash was to be actually put aside each year for me."

"Yes," replied the detective. "And he died at the age of seventy-six."

"Precisely."

"So that at the time of his death he had already saved twenty-one million dollars."

"Yes; now wait. At the time of his death he was worth such a vast fortune outside of this sum that he had saved for me, that it was his hobby, and in fact his command, that the practise of putting aside a million dollars a year should be continued after his death."

"Out of the fortune he left to you?"

"Yes; from the principal, if necessary. I was to put one million dollars in cash with the other savings each year until the whole amount should have become fifty millions."

"In other words you were to continue the practise during twenty-nine years after his death."

"Yes."

"Or until you were fifty years old yourself."

"Exactly."

"Well?"

"He wished more than that, to become a silent guardian over the vast accumulation of money."

"I understand now. That is why he directed that his body should be brought back here."

"That is it, Mr. Carter; and that is the reason why, once each year, I enter what I have described as the 'third vault.' That is where his body lies, and that is where I deposit the million dollars in cash."

"I begin to see things more clearly now, Miss Lee."

"The anniversary of my father's death occurred just one month ago. He had been dead four years at that time, and consequently at that time I made my fourth annual visit to the tomb of my father."

"Well?"

"You must understand that on the occasion of my first visit to the place, after I had placed his body there, I did not linger. I merely made my deposit and hurried out again."

"I can appreciate that."

"On the second occasion I was less timorous, although even then I scarcely looked around me. I deposited my package in the niche assigned to it and turned away, only lingering long enough for one glance at his face, which, as I have said, is as perfectly preserved as though he were sleeping.

"When I made the third visit, with my third package, I looked around me a bit more, and I had the uneasy sensation that things had been disturbed; that things had been moved; that some other than myself had visited the place."

"What?" exclaimed the detective.

"Wait—wait, please."

"Well?"

"I was not at all sure, and I had not the courage at the time to investigate thoroughly. More than that, I believed the thought to be one of utter folly. It was simply out of the question. It was all my imagination."

"How could it have been anything else than your imagination?"

"You shall hear in a moment."

"Go on, please."

"I was so startled by the thought that I started to run from the vault; but as soon as I was outside the door I reproved myself for my fears, and returned."

"You did?"

"Yes. However, I did not really enter the vault again. I merely stood in the doorway and carefully studied the interior of the vault, which you must understand I had never done before."

"Yes."

"I made up my mind right then and there that when I visited the place one year later I would be so familiar with the place that I would be able to tell at once if anything had been disturbed."

"I understand."

"I remained there in that doorway for possibly half an hour, and when I turned away from it I possessed in my mind's eye a perfect photograph of the interior of the vault."

"In order that you would be able to recognize every spot in it the next time you should visit it."

"Precisely."

"And your next visit to that one took place just a month ago?"

"Just one month ago; yes."

"What did you discover then?"

"I discovered that three of the packages of one million dollars each were missing."

The detective started to his feet in amazement.

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed.

"It does not seem possible, but it is true," she replied.

"It is entirely—utterly amazing. Are you sure that you were not mistaken?"

"I am as positive of the truth of what I state as that we are sitting here together discussing it."

"But might it not be that the three packages you missed had never been placed there at all?"

"That might be the case—indeed, I would have been inclined to suppose it to be, were it not for the fact that one of the three missing packages was one that I had taken to the vault myself; the first one that I took there."

"The whole thing seems incomprehensible."

"It is incomprehensible, unaccountable—but it is the fact."

"What did you do when you made the discovery?"

"I ran from the place as quickly as I could."

"And have not returned to it since?"

"On the contrary, I did return to it almost at once. Within ten minutes. I only waited long enough to recover my courage—and I did not go ten feet from the door all the time I was outside the third vault."

"And then——"

"Then I had sufficiently calmed myself to be cool and collected. I forced myself to study the interior of the place thoroughly and carefully."

"Well?"

"You must understand, in the first place, that when my father created that place, he placed fifty receptacles for the fifty packages there. These receptacles are steel boxes plated inside and out with silver to prevent corrosion. Each one is provided with a swinging door at the front, and the doors are supposed to be sealed——"

"With what?"

"Merely with big red seals such as are used on legal documents."

"Paper seals, in other words?"

"Yes. Locks were not supposed to be necessary in such a place."

"I should say not."

"Well, the doors of the receptacles remain unsealed until packages are placed in them."

"And then you merely wet the seal and place it across the jam of the little door?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"Now, what did you discover when you returned to examine the place coolly?"

"That almost every seal in the place had been carefully and dexterously cut through, as if some person had made a careful selection of which package to take first, and also that every package that I examined—and I looked at many of them—that all but one that I examined at that time had been moved in its place."

"How could you tell that?"

"By the fact that my father being extremely methodical in everything he did, labeled each package as he deposited it. The labels bear the year and number, etc. Then, when he placed them in their places, he did it as carefully as you would arrange books on a shelf, with the titles at the top."

"Do you mean that some of them had been changed?"

"Nearly all of them had been changed. Some had been thrust back into their places with the label at the opposite end; others were on their sides; still others were upside down. It looked as if some person had ransacked the place, as I said a moment ago, as if selecting the most available package to take away."

"Still, there should be no choice."

"There is none."

"Each contains a million dollars in cash, does it not?"

"Exactly a million dollars in cash."

"And there could be very little gold used?"

"There is no gold there at all."

"Tell me what sort of money it is, please."

"Treasury notes of the United States, and Bank of England notes. They represent the two countries which my father believed would exist through many generations, without change."

"I see. And therefore their notes would always be redeemable in gold."

"Yes, sir."

"You say that three of the packages were missing?"

"Yes."

"Three million dollars?"

"Yes."

"And that one of the missing packages was one that you had deposited there yourself?"

"Yes; the first one."

"Miss Lee, I hope that I will not offend you if I ask some very direct questions? Possibly impertinent ones."

"Not at all. I have asked you to come here to help me. I mean to make use of all the assistance you can give me in every sense of the word. But I can already anticipate the first question you would ask."

"It is: Do you ever walk in your sleep? Are you a somnambulist?"

"That is the question I would ask. I can truthfully reply *no*. And even if it were so, it would be impossible for me to enter this room where we are now, in my sleep."

"Why so?"

"Because that steel door there, which communicates between this room and the entry which leads to the library, is provided with a time-lock which I always set

myself when I close this room. I could not reenter it myself, sleeping or waking, until the time had rolled the tumblers of the lock around."

"That is quite true."

"So you see at once that the sleep-walking theory has nothing to do with the case."

"Yes," replied the detective, "I see that very plainly."

CHAPTER IV.

BALKED AT EVERY POINT.

"There is, of course, only one solution to this problem, and we must search for it," said the detective, after a pause, during which both had been thinking deeply.

"You mean that there is a secret entrance to that vault from the outside, which I know nothing about, do you not?"

"Yes."

"I have thought of that—but that, too, is impossible."

"Excuse me. It may be improbable if you like, but it is not impossible. Your father might have arranged such a place without your knowledge."

"I will admit that you are right—from your standpoint; but it is impossible from mine."

"Why so?"

"Because I knew my father as nobody else in the world knew him. If he had caused such a place to be made—if he had arranged for a secret entrance to the vaults through that particular one—he would not have died and left me unaware of it."

"Was he thoroughly in his right mind up to the time of his death?"

"Entirely so, until almost his last breath."

"And did he know that he was about to die?"

"For almost twenty-four hours before the end came."

"You were with him all that time?"

"Every moment of it; and we were alone together, moreover. He knew that his end was near, and he would have no one else near him but me."

"But during those last hours you talked of these things?"

"Yes; over and over again, until he was satisfied that he had covered every point."

"There may have been listeners. You may have been overheard."

"That, too, is impossible."

"How is it impossible?"

"He died in this room."

"Ah!"

"We were alone together here until the end; and the steel door was closed. You can see for yourself that it would be utterly impossible for any person to hide in the room, and you can also understand that if you were outside it, with the door closed, you could not hear a gunshot from the interior."

"That seems to be quite true."

"And even had there been listeners, what would it have availed them since he did not refer to any secret entrance?"

"It merely would have informed them of the vast amount of money contained in the vault; and in four years—three, rather—it might not be impossible that an entrance could have been made from the outside."

"Pardon me, but it is quite impossible."

"Again, why?"

"Mr. Carter, I have already told you that this small wing of the house cost more than a million dollars."

"Yes."

"Let me in a word or two, before you examine the plans, give you an idea of its construction."

"Well?"

"The ceiling of this room is twelve feet high; that of the vault beneath it is ten feet, and that of the subvault is eight feet. That makes thirty feet."

"Yes."

"The 'third vault,' as I have named it, might be said to be a wing extending off to the south from the subvault, and that is nothing more nor less than a steel box, surrounded by stone and cement. It is itself six feet high, eight feet wide, and it extends into the earth from the main vault, fourteen feet. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"Now, if you first excavated space in the earth to receive such a huge box as the two vaults underneath this room would make, and then made a box of the dimensions required, and made it of chilled steel twenty-four inches thick and lowered it into the excavation, you would have exactly what exists under us at this moment.

"You would have to add to it, of course, the additional excavation to receive the third vault, which you would lower to the level with the subvault."

"Yes."

"Having placed that in position, you would then lower this huge steel box into position beside the other.

"This great box would fit perfectly with the smaller one at the bottom, so that when they were lowered into place they would fit exactly together."

"Yes; I understand."

"Now, having placed your two boxes in position, and having connected the subvault with the third vault by means of a very remarkable door, which I will show to you presently, you next build around the whole a wall of granite and cement which hardens into stone—and this wall is also two feet thick *all the way around and over the top of the third vault.*"

"It is marvelous."

"And so you see that any person who sought to create a separate entrance to the third vault would be obliged to pierce two feet of granite and two more feet of har-

veyized steel before it could be accomplished. I say that it is impossible."

"It certainly would appear so."

"And, moreover, it would have to be done eighteen feet or more below the surface of the ground. The mere suggestion of such a thing is absurd on the face of it."

"And yet the packages have disappeared."

"And yet the packages have disappeared—*yes*."

"Your arguments seem unanswerable, Miss Lee."

"They are unanswerable. That is the terror of it; for the entire affair amounts to a terror to me."

"I must return to my original statement, that there can be but one explanation."

Miriam shrugged her shoulders with some impatience.

"Your father *must* have made a secret entrance to the third vault and have forgotten or neglected to tell you about it."

"If you had known my father as I knew him, you would not even suggest such a thing."

"You did not take the packages out of the vault yourself, did you?"

"No," she replied calmly, and smiling. "That is a perfectly natural question, too. I have even caught myself asking myself that very question."

"What is contained in the vault that is directly beneath this room and in the one directly beneath that one?"

"Money, securities, stocks, bonds; valuables of all descriptions. I am a much richer woman than the world supposes, Mr. Carter."

"I can certainly believe that."

"My father was a miser who made wealth so rapidly that he could spend like a prince and still hoard his wealth—as he always did. When he died, I promised to carry out that one hobby of his, of putting aside the million each year. I distinctly declined to go on with and to continue his other operations, although he wished me to do that, also."

"Such immense wealth must be a great care to you, Miss Lee."

"On the contrary, I do not permit it to be a care. When anything of the kind troubles me, I simply turn it into cash and store it away below where we are seated. It ceases to bother me in that way; and thus I am gradually withdrawing from business."

"When you want any cash, you merely go below and get it."

"Yes. And I have long since ceased to keep account of what I take away from the hoard. It is a foolish and a useless task."

"Suppose that you had married with all this hoarded wealth here in your house——"

"Believe me, Mr. Carter, no thought of my wealth or of anything that concerns it has kept me from becoming a wife. I have not yet seen the man I wished to marry—and there are more millions down there than an ordinary spendthrift could dispose of in a lifetime, even if I allowed him two or three a year."

She smiled and looked up at him brightly.

"It is hateful, isn't it, all this talk of money?"

"I think it is rather interesting; that is, the manner in which you talk about it."

"How is that?"

"You refer to it as if it were an art collection, or one of rare coins, or tapestries."

"And that is precisely how I regard it."

"Now that we have given our minds a little rest, let us return to the subject that interests us."

"Yes."

"You stated that on two occasions before this last one it seemed to you that something in the vault had been moved; that you were impressed with that idea when you entered it."

"It was on the third visit I made to the vault after the death of my father that I received that impression, and I carefully studied the appearance of everything there so that I could not possibly be mistaken when I should return to it again."

"Tell me, what is there in the vault that could have been moved so that you would notice the fact at all?"

"Merely the small doors that I have described, that close the receptacles for the packages of money."

"You mean, then, that you thought that the positions of some of them had been changed?"

"Yes; they did not look the same."

"And yet it was an entire year since you had seen them."

"That is true. But when one visits a place of that sort, even only once in a year, it makes an impression on the brain which is not soon eliminated."

"I should imagine that it might indeed do that."

"I thought, too, that one of the boxes had been moved a little—one of the top ones."

"Ah, then they are detachable?"

"Oh, yes. They are placed one upon another, in tiers."

"And one of them seemed to be out of position?"

"I thought so. I thought it had been in perfect position when I saw it last; but, you see, I was not *sure*—not at that time."

"Yes."

"I left it just as it was; that is, out of position."

"Well?"

"When I visited the vault a month ago, it had been carefully replaced where it belonged."

"My dear young lady, this is altogether the most astounding tale that I ever listened to. One might be forgiven for supposing you had lost your senses with the possession of all this wealth, and the dread necessity of visiting the body of your father once each year."

"Quite so," she answered quietly. "Only I have not.

And it is all quite true, as you shall see for yourself. That is one reason why I hesitated to send for you."

"Eh? Because you feared that I might think you had gone mad?"

"No-o; I did not exactly fear it. I think I am altogether too sane for anybody to suspect such a thing seriously. What I did fear was that you might make that an excuse for declining to enter upon an investigation with me. And yet, what have we to investigate?"

"It seems to me that there are a great many things to investigate."

"Mr. Carter, I have fought off the desire to send for you for a whole month. I argued to myself that I did not care about the millions that were stolen, not if all that are in that particular vault were taken, for I could spare them and never miss them at all. But all the time there was the feeling that my father's burial-place was being desecrated, and that the one great wish of his life was being placed at naught. Then I remembered what he had said about you—and I decided. And now," she added, rising, "if you think you are prepared for it, we will close this room and pay a visit to the vaults."

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE FATHER.

"Before we undertake that," said the detective, "just a few more apparently idle questions, if you don't mind."

"Certainly," she replied, reseating herself. "What more can I tell you before we descend to the vaults?"

"For one thing, why would it not have been easy for you to have deposited the entire fifty millions—or, rather, the necessary amount to make up that sum—at once in the third vault, and to have closed it until such time as you were directed to open it?"

"There is only one reply to that. It is not what my father directed me to do."

"He wished you to make that deposit annually, notwithstanding the fact that you had ample funds on hand to have done it at once?"

"Yes. He wished to feel that even in death he was receiving a million dollars a year."

"I understand. You really took the money to *him*."

"Exactly that."

"And he wanted to know that he would be there to receive it."

"That was precisely his idea. He had been so long associated with the idea of making money that he dreaded to abandon it even in death."

"And so he planned this extraordinary affair."

"And so he planned it exactly as I have told it to you. He made every plan himself, even to the smallest detail; and I wish you to understand, Mr. Carter, that in carrying out his wishes there has never been a moment in the actual consummation of them when I have not had the feeling that he was at my elbow, watching me to see that I did it all as he directed."

"You loved your father, Miss Lee?"

Tears came into her eyes as she replied:

"I adored him, Mr. Carter."

"And his love for you——"

"Amounted to idolatry. When I tell you that I have not the least doubt that he would have abandoned all his riches and have pauperized himself had it been necessary for my welfare, you can understand how dearly he loved me."

"There was great sympathy between you always?"

"So great that we could frequently tell what the other was thinking about without speaking."

"I have heard of such a condition existing between a mother and child," said Nick musingly, "but never before as between a father and child."

"It was true in the case of my father and me."

"Tell me something of the daily life as passed between your father and yourself."

She regarded him for a moment in astonishment, and then quietly asked:

"Will you tell me why you make that request?"

"Yes. I make it because I believe there may be something in the psychological effect of this case which will assist us."

"I don't think I understand you."

"And I do not know that I can make myself perfectly understood on the point. However, I will try."

"Please."

"Where two minds are thoroughly *en rapport*, there exists an affinity between them which permit one to become cognizant of facts known to the other, without being told of them."

"You mean something like what I just said, about our knowing each other's thoughts?"

"Yes."

"And that possibly, at some time, he might have possessed certain knowledge which he never told to me, but which I nevertheless knew about."

"Yes; knew about it without realizing that you did know about it."

"I am afraid that that is too deep for me. I am dreadfully material, Mr. Carter."

"It is all the better that you are, for our purposes."

"I suppose that in reality you are referring again to that idea of yours that he had a secret entrance to his tomb made, and that he never told me about it."

"Yes; that is true."

"And you mean to say that this psychological effect, as you call it, would make me conscious of it, although I never really knew anything about it?"

"Something like that. It isn't very plain, I know, but that is about what I mean."

"But it is absurd, you know."

"Granted. Still, it is no more absurd than that a man should walk into that vault without doors, and carry away three million dollars."

She bowed her head.

"That is quite true," she said. "Still, how can I tell you something that I do not know?"

"I don't know that you can tell me. I have only asked you to tell me something of the daily life that passed between your father and yourself, in order that I may find in what you relate to me a something, however frail, to stand upon in the researches I shall have to make in this affair before it is completed."

She shook her head sadly.

"Don't misunderstand me," she said. "I am perfectly willing to tell you all—everything that concerned my father and me, from the time I was born to the day of his death; but I do wish that I understood better what you mean."

"Possibly it will become more clear as we progress."

"Very well. Tell me what you wish to know."

"I want to know, first, the history of one ordinary day in the life of yourself and your father. How it began, what happened during the day, how it ended—and, in fact, all about it. Then, from what you tell me, I shall find questions to ask of you."

"Oh!"

"That will not be difficult, will it?"

"Not at all. Let me see. We were like school children in one thing; our favorite day was Saturday. That was because it was a short day."

"Yes."

"Frequently he did not go to his office at all on that day, but even if he did so, he never remained very long. We breakfasted usually at eight, and he started for his office immediately afterward, always telling me what time to expect him home. If the day was pleasant, I usually rode through the park accompanied by a groom, always careful to return at the time I expected my father. We frequently met at the door, we were both so punctual."

"That was the training of his life."

"Yes; and it has been the training of mine. Well, we lunched together after that, and then sometimes we went out and sometimes we remained in the house, but we always passed that day together. He never permitted business to interfere with his devoting that day to me. Then we dined, of course, sometimes out, sometimes at home. In the evening we usually played a game of chess. Why, Mr. Carter, I see nothing in that to assist you in any way."

"Nor do I—at present."

"Well, all our days were as nearly like that as we could make them. Of course, there were social duties that interfered somewhat, but we always fought rather shy of them. I think that is really all the idea I can give you."

"But what did you talk about during these many hours you passed together?"

"Everything under the sun, I think."

"His business, for example?"

She looked up at the detective quickly.

"Mr. Carter," she said, "have you ever heard how the sons of kings are taught kingship and statecraft from the cradle?"

"Often."

"Well, I was taught finance from the cradle. I imbibed it as I grew in stature and years. I don't think that I ever realized that I was being taught. I was as familiar with my father's affairs as he was, almost. We discussed them as partners in business might have done."

"That is interesting. You were fond of it, were you?"

"Very. We always devoted an hour to his affairs each evening before retiring. He frequently asked my advice about his business matters—or pretended to do so."

"I have no doubt that he did it quite seriously."

"Oh, I know that he did toward the end of his life."

"And of course you often discussed this project of removing his body from the mausoleum to the vault beneath us?"

"During the last few years of his life—yes."

"Do you remember the first occasion when he broached the subject?"

"Perfectly well."

"Tell me in what manner he introduced it."

"Why, in his usual manner. He began by saying that he wished me to carry on, after his death, the habit he had had of laying by in that secret vault one million dollars each year."

"You have not told me before that the third vault is a secret vault."

"Have I not? It is secret only in this way: That if you were now in the subvault, you might examine the walls of it with the greatest care and you would still have no idea that there was a third vault connected with it."

"Well?"

"He told me then of the arrangement he had made in regard to having his body removed from the mausoleum, and that he had led the authorities who would have it in charge to understand that it was his desire to be buried at sea, and—but I have already told you that."

"Yes; and that, I suppose, was the time when he said that he wished his body brought back here and placed where it is now?"

"Yes. And he gave me minute instructions at the time how it should be done."

"Was the Hindu *ayah* with you at that time?"

"Yes. We had brought her back from India with us during one of our trips abroad."

"Did he include her in his instructions to you?"

"Yes."

"Because she happened to be blind?"

"Yes. He mentioned that fact."

"Was that the reason why he engaged her?"

"He did not engage her at all. I did that. I saw her. She had a kindly face. She was a young woman—thirty, or so, I should think. She could speak English, and I took a fancy to her from the first."

"You also felt some pity for her condition, did you not?"

"Certainly. However, I liked her, and she became devoted to me."

"I can understand that."

"And notwithstanding the fact that she was blind she was in many ways the most useful servant I ever had."

"Do you happen to know where she is now?"

"I have known nothing whatever about her since I bade her good-by at the steamer to send her home. But I placed her in charge of a commissionaire who was with a party. She could easily be traced if you thought it necessary; although I do not see how she could possibly figure in the matter at all."

"Something figures in it somewhere, and we must try all things. Now, tell me, did the discussion of this matter by your father shock you?"

"Not at all. It was his wish; that was sufficient for me."

"But was it not unpleasant to you to discuss his probable death?"

"Unpleasant in one sense, yes; but not as you mean it. He had accustomed me to the idea of his death ever since I can remember. You must remember that he was an old man. I had been taught all my life to expect that he would die long before I should; and I had always promised him faithfully that I would not grieve for him, nor mourn for him, but that I would accept the event philosophically. I was not reared like other children."

"I should say that you were not," said the detective, smiling, and he added: "Come, now, we will visit the vaults."

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH MANY SECRET DOORS.

They had already talked together more than an hour, and it was therefore now after noontime, so Miriam asked the detective if he would not prefer some luncheon before descending to the vaults.

"No," he replied; "I would rather go down there with a clear brain, and luncheon, however light, must perforce benumb some of the faculties."

"Very well," she said. "We will close the doors."

So the great steel doors, with the time-lock upon one of them, were pulled shut and fastened, and the time-lock itself was for the moment thrown out of gear.

Next, Miriam turned on the electric lights in the room, and then, pointing toward a silver ball, which hung at the end of a heavy wire cord, she asked Nick if he would pull down upon that one while she worked with another.

By doing so, Nick saw a heavy steel blind glide noiselessly from between the walls and pass gently across the face of the window, until it stopped with a slight click; and while he was operating that one, she had performed the same service for both of the other windows.

"They are four inches thick, and very heavy and strong," she explained. "They are very perfectly balanced in their places so that it is no effort to move them in either direction, as you discovered."

"But how do you move them in the opposite direction?"

"Merely by releasing the locks which hold them now. They glide back of themselves."

"And how do you release the locks."

"By pressing upon any one or on all of three silver knobs that are there in the middle of the room under the desk. See!"

She crossed to the desk and pressed upon one of the knobs, whereupon the blind that Nick had manipulated slowly glided open again.

"Now, if you will be good enough to close it once more, Mr. Carter," she said, smiling.

"The floor on which we stand," she said to him, when that was done, "like every other part of this wing of the building, is of steel, but it is so entirely covered with rugs that you do not perceive the fact. And now, I suppose, you are wondering how we are to get into the depths below."

"I certainly am. I am fairly good at finding such things, but I confess that this one would be beyond me."

"Do you care to make the effort?" she asked, smiling.

"No; I prefer, very much, that you should show me how it is done."

"I suppose you have noticed that full-length painting of my father, in the large frame over there, done when he was quite a young man? Have you not?"

"I have noticed it, yes; and wondered if it were a portrait of your father."

"Yes. I think he was twenty-two when it was painted. The frame, although thickly plated with gold, is really of steel. If you care to examine it more closely, you will see that it appears to be set solidly into the wall."

The detective crossed the room and examined the frame carefully, and it was as she had said. It seemed, indeed, to be a part of the wall itself.

When he turned away from the examination, she said:

"Now, if you will observe me, I will show you something that is interesting."

"Everything here is interesting," he replied, as she crossed the room toward one of the blinds they had closed over the windows.

There, in the very middle of the blind, where there was just a thumb-nail indenture or cut in the steel, she pushed aside a small slide large enough to admit her hand.

"Come over here," she said to him, and he followed her.

"If you will look into that opening you will see a small stationary key, which I now turn—so. Next, I pass to the second blind, and do exactly the same that I have done with that one—so; and next I pass to the third blind, and repeat the operation once again—thus. Now, if you will look behind you at the portrait of my father, please."

Nick did as directed.

The portrait had swung out as upon hinges into the room, thus forming a door, beyond which the detective could see there was a flight of carpeted stairs.

"You see," said Miriam, restraining him when he would have stepped forward, "how thoroughly everything has been done. The way to the vaults cannot possibly be opened until all three of the blinds are closed, thus effectually shutting off the possibility of observation. And, now, those blinds could not possibly be opened again until after that door is closed."

"Wonderful!" said Nick. "And now it occurs to me to ask a question or two."

"Well, what are they?"

"How are the vaults below lighted and ventilated?"

"They are ventilated in the same manner as this room. I cannot explain it to you more than to assure you that the ventilation is perfect at all times. My father employed some great Frenchman on that part of his creation."

"And the lights?"

"The lights," she replied, "we have to carry in our hands. This room, as you see, is perfectly lighted by electricity; but, of course, electricity could not be taken below, because it would not be prudent to have the vaults wired. However, in that cabinet over there in that corner, there is a whole battery of portable lamps, each with its coil of wire leading to the switchboard. If you will wait a moment for me, I will light up for you. I have done it hundreds of times for my father."

She crossed quickly to the cabinet and secured two of the standards, each with a cluster of five lights, and with them descended the stairs, trailing the wires after her as she proceeded.

In a moment she was back again, arranging the wires along the stairway as she came.

And now she took two more clusters in her hands and descended a second time.

She was gone much longer this time, but at last she returned, arranging the two more lines of wires as she came, and as she did the first time.

"Now," she said, "I have lighted the subvault."

"But I wished to see the mechanism of that one, also," expostulated Nick.

"I can show it to you later, Mr. Carter. I really did not think of it until I was down there with the lights in my hands. But, come. Will you take one of these lights, and I will take another?"

"These are genuinely portable lamps, are they not?"

"Yes—dry batteries; they are rather heavy, and will burn with sixteen-candle power for twelve hours. We will not need them, but we will take them along."

She led the way down the stairs then, and presently the detective found himself in the first vault beneath the room above.

It was not at all unlike rooms to be found in any safe-deposit vault, with the one exception, that there were no locks attached to the safes along the walls. Here locks were, indeed, unnecessary.

The floor was covered by a heavy rug, and there were two comfortable chairs and a couch in the room, as well as a library-table desk with a desk-chair. Altogether it was a very comfortable and cozy place, considering what it was and where it was.

"We will not linger here," said Miriam; and she at once led the way to a flight of stairs precisely like those they had already descended, and followed them to the subvault.

This subvault in appearance was an exact reproduction of the vault above it, and Nick looked about him in vain for any sign of a third vault.

Miriam had already been down, of course, and had placed the two five-light lamps she took with her in convenient places prepared for them for lighting the room to the best advantage; and it will be remembered that she and Nick were each carrying an extra hand-lamp now.

"We will put our lamps here on the table for the present," she said. "And now, will you take that chair? It is the one my father always occupied when we were in this room."

"I find myself wondering," said the detective, as he obeyed her suggestion, and while he regarded her with undisguised admiration, which, however, had nothing of offense in it, "how it is that you speak so lightly and so happily of your father all the time."

She smiled at him across the table.

"I understand you," she said, "although, I think, you express what you wished to say rather imperfectly. But I will answer you. I speak lightly and happily of him because that is the way I feel about him and toward him. He is not dead to me; he is only absent. It is a philosophy that he taught me from a child."

"Indeed?"

"And whenever I am here—which is really very seldom, for I do not enjoy coming here, even in the light of what I am about to say—whenever I am here I feel as if his very presence were near me."

"And his body is even now just beyond that wall," said the detective, pointing toward the south.

"Yes," she replied. "I see that you remember your points of compass. His body is there; but, truthfully, that is no more to me than a portrait would be. I remember that when he told me of his plan to have his body placed here, I suggested that a good portrait would serve just as well. I think he was very nearly angry at me then; but he ended by laughing. We were good chums always. I miss him dreadfully, but I regard him as absent, only."

"It is a beautiful philosophy, after all," said Nick.

"Yes. Now tell me, do you think you can find the way into the third vault? You are facing that part of the wall beyond which it is located."

"I have been studying it ever since I have been here," replied Nick.

"With any result?"

"Not as yet."

"Do you see any traces of a door?"

"Not one."

"If I had not told you that there is another vault there, would you believe that one existed?"

"No. Particularly if I took the construction of the building into consideration."

"Exactly. And yet it is there."

"It is difficult to believe, is it not?"

"Yes. Do you wish me to show it to you at once, or do you prefer to test your skill upon it?"

"I think if you are not impatient, that I would like to look for it a little while."

"But you do not seem to be searching at all."

"I imagine that it is not the sort of thing that one discovers by searching."

"How, then?"

"By thought. As you say, one would not suspect its presence at all if one were not told of the fact. Knowing that it is there, I would like to think out how it can be found."

"You shall have all the time you require—all you wish; but I don't think you will discover it."

The furnishings of the room have already been described.

Nick, as Miriam had stated, was seated in the chair which her father had been accustomed to occupy when they were in that room together; and therefore she was in the one which had always been regarded as her own.

The two chairs half faced each other, and the one in which the detective was seated exactly faced the south; in other words, the wall beyond which the third vault was located.

He had been in a brown study for a long time, when happening to raise his eyes he discovered that hers were fixed upon him with a quizzical smile.

Instantly, for some reason unknown to science or man, that smile revealed to him that he was what a child at play would designate as "warm." That is that the secret was near at hand.

"It is something about this chair!" he exclaimed, striking one of the arms with his hand.

He fancied that it gave a hollow sound, and he seized it—and, lo! it moved.

He tried to raise it at the front end, but it held fast. He made the same attempt at the rear end of the arm, and it responded to his touch.

He heard Miriam exclaim and he looked again toward the southern wall.

The door to the third vault was slowly swinging out into the room.

CHAPTER VII.

A DEAD GUARDIAN OF MILLIONS.

"Well done, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Miriam, rising and approaching him. "You have given me confidence in our venture. I begin to think that somehow you will solve the mystery."

"Do you think," asked Nick, "that I discovered the means of opening that door myself?"

"Certainly."

"Unaided?"

"Assuredly."

"On the contrary."

"I don't understand you."

"I was told how to open it."

"You—were—*told?*"

"Yes."

"Nonsense!"

"I was told how to open that door, Miss Lee."

"May I politely ask who told you?"

"You did."

"I?"

"Yes."

"I am very positive that I did nothing of the sort."

"You told me as plainly as if you had uttered the words.'

"May I ask how?"

"With your eyes."

"You are laughing at me."

"I assure you that I am not. I had no idea whatever how to go to work to discover the secret, when, happening to raise my eyes, they met yours. You were smiling at me, and your mind was thinking, 'How close he is to it all the time, and he never guesses it.'"

"As a matter of fact, that is precisely what I was thinking."

"Well, did I not say that you told me?"

"But that did not tell you that it was the arm of the chair—the right arm, the rear end of the right arm—

and that you must raise it, turning the chair just a trifle as you do so."

"Did I turn the chair? I was not conscious of that. That part of it was an accident."

"Whatever you say about it, it is none the less a fact that you accomplished it, and that I am delighted that you did so. But, come!"

She started toward the open door which led into the third vault; but Nick reached out a restraining hand and stopped her.

"Pardon me, Miss Lee," he said. "This time I would like to take the lead. You don't mind if I do so?"

"Certainly not."

"I would like you to stay close to me, and—if you will be so good—carry one of those five-light lamps in your hand. I will carry the other. I want all the light I can get into that apartment, you know."

She seized the lamp and approached the door, Nick in advance.

He paused, however, at the threshold.

The dimensions of the room have already been given.

In the exact middle of it was a platform, or dais, six feet in length and three feet wide. Upon the platform, draped with a blanket of woven silver wire, was a mahogany, couch-shaped block, and upon this extraordinary couch was the lifelike figure of Burleigh Lee.

The sight was startling.

The embalmers had done their work with wonderful perfection; they had even tinted the features and the lips in lifelike colors.

Save for the stiffness of the attitude, which nothing could conceal, the man did look as if he were sleeping.

And in the position, even, some effort had been made by the embalmers to produce the appearance of life, for the body was not stretched upon its back, with the hands crossed over the breast, after the manner and style of corpses generally.

Instead, it was lying rather on one side, with the face toward the door.

The left arm was stretched down along the side of the body, and the fingers of the left hand were upon the pages of an open book; the right arm was bent at the elbow and the hand just missed contact with the face.

Nick turned to Miriam, as he exclaimed:

"It is the most astoundingly lifelike apparition I ever saw."

"I do not know why you use the word apparition," she replied.

"Because I could think of no other fit term to apply."

"You knew my father. Does it not seem as if he were, indeed, there before us, Mr. Carter?"

"It does; it does, indeed!"

"And, now, do you understand what I mean when I said that it seemed to me more like a portrait than like the dead body of my father?"

"Yes; I understand you now. There is nothing uncanny about this."

"No."

"There is something very real about it."

"No; there is nothing real, either. It is only a picture."

He regarded her narrowly for a moment. The perfect self-poise of this young woman was a marvel to him, and he could only explain it by remembering what she had told him of the life-training she had had.

"And now we must get down to business," he said presently.

"Yes."

"Have you opened this door since you were here a month ago, when you made the discovery?"

"No."

"You have not even been in the vaults since that time?"

"No."

"If you were inside this vault here, and I were to close the door upon you, is there a way to open it from the inside, so that you could get out again?"

"Yes; certainly."

"Now, do you remember exactly how everything appeared when you were here one month ago?"

"Perfectly."

"You studied everything carefully, so you would remember upon the occasion of another visit?"

"Yes."

"Look well about you—we will hold the lamps high—and tell me if you think anything has been moved since that visit?"

"I think not," she said, after a silence, during which she obeyed the detective's request.

"Look carefully."

"I have done so. I can see nothing. It might be well to examine the boxes——"

She started forward, but Nick restrained her.

"We have not arrived at that point yet," he said.

She raised her eyes to his, wonderingly.

"What else is there to do?" she asked.

"That must be determined as we proceed, Miss Lee."

The lights they held in their hands perfectly lighted up the room which was called the third vault, and thus was revealed the entire interior of the strange tomb.

The real floor of the room was, of course, of steel like the others; but over this had been laid a covering of tiling.

All the furnishings of the place were silver and gold save that one massive block of mahogany carved into the shape of a couch; but even that, as has already been said, was draped with a blanket made of small silver rings woven together.

At the left extremity of the room—looking past the head of the figure on the couch—and standing with the

back against the wall, was a massive chair which looked as if it might have been fashioned of solid gold, although it was doubtless of some other metal, heavily plated.

In shape and size this article of furniture was an ideal "bishop's chair," such as one always sees in Episcopalian churches.

Beyond the body, at the southern side of the room, were the boxes, each of which had been destined one day to contain a million dollars, or the value thereof in United States or Bank of England notes.

These were arranged on a succession of shelves, silver plated, and five in number, and each was just long enough to hold ten boxes in line.

To the right, that is at the western side of the room, was a square article of furniture intended to represent an altar, for there was a kneeling-stool before it, and this altar was draped with a blanket precisely similar to the one over the couch, save that the woven wire rings were of gold instead of silver.

There was nothing whatever upon the altar other than the blanket.

All this the detective studied with exceeding care.

There was not the slightest doubt in his own mind that there was a secret entrance to this third vault, either from some other part of the dead millionaire's home, or from elsewhere.

Why the old capitalist at the time he was on his death-bed had not revealed this secret as well as others to his daughter, the detective could not guess; but that such a secret existed and that the old man had either forgotten or purposely neglected to describe it to Miriam, Nick Carter thoroughly believed.

The thing was to find it.

Nick did not for a moment doubt that he could discover it in time, but he was also convinced that it would take time to do so.

The very cunning with which the other contrivances of that strange place had been created, was proof positive that even greater ingenuity had been exercised on this room.

It might be that he would have to spend days or even weeks in the effort to discover that secret entrance, but that it existed, and that he would find it ultimately, he knew.

"Look again, Miss Lee," he said, turning to his companion after another and a longer survey of the room. "Study carefully everything that you can see and tell me if you see anything at all which does not appear to be exactly as you saw it last, a month ago."

This time she devoted even a longer period to her inspection, but it ended in the same result. She saw nothing—nothing at all that could suggest that the room had been entered since she was there.

"There is nothing," she said, "absolutely nothing."

"Then I think that we may enter," said the detective.

"You are the leader now, Mr. Carter. You must tell me what to do," remarked Miriam.

"Very well. I will ask you in that case, to stand just inside the door and between it and the altar, with your lamp. I will place my lamp for the moment, at least, in the bishop's chair."

When that was done, he crossed to the treasure boxes, and without touching any of them with his hands, examined them closely as they were placed on the shelves.

It will be remembered that twenty-five of them, altogether, had received their deposits, and hence, that many of them had been provided with the large red seals; also it must not be forgotten that Miriam had described these to the detective as having been cut by a sharp instrument in the hands of the vandal who had visited the place.

"I see but one seal that has not been cut," said Nick, after a moment.

"There should be two," replied Miriam.

"Put your lamp on the altar a moment. Now come here beside me. In which of the boxes did you place that last deposit, made a month ago?"

"In this——" she began, and then started back with a little cry of amazement and fright.

"The seal has been cut since I was here!" she cried out.

"I thought so," said the detective. "Now open the box and tell me if its contents are intact."

She did so with feverish haste, but only to discover that the box was empty.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WONDERFUL TREASURE CHAMBER.

Miriam Lee looked at Nick Carter in utter consternation.

"It is unbelievable!" she exclaimed.

"And yet, nevertheless, it seems true," replied the detective.

"The very last deposit that I made here is missing."

"Yes. I think it would be well to discover how much more than that is missing."

"There were three of them missing that we knew about before we came here to-day, and now there is a fourth," she said.

"They may all have been taken by this time, Miss Lee. Let us begin at the beginning and go through the boxes one by one."

She laughed nervously.

"At least there is one of the deposits left," she said. "There remains one of the seals that is uncut."

"Uncut—yes," replied the detective, "but not unmolested. Even that box has been opened."

"How could it have been opened without breaking the seal?"

"Because for some reason the seal did not stick well when it was placed on the box. It came loose at one side, and the vandal was not obliged to cut it in order to get into the box."

"Let us go through them systematically," she said, now thoroughly herself again, and as self-possessed as Nick Carter himself.

"Certainly that is the thing to do."

And so they began at the beginning; at the first deposit made by old Burleigh Lee, and so along the first line of boxes, checking each off by its number and date as they proceeded.

The dates on the boxes do not concern us, but if we take the numbers of the boxes that had already been filled, from one to twenty-five inclusive, they found that numbers 10, 14, 18, 22, and 25 were empty.

"You see," said the detective, when they had completed the inspection, "five of your boxes have been rifled; ten, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two, and twenty-five. Twenty-five is the last one in which you made a deposit."

"Yes."

"Altogether, five million dollars have disappeared."

"Yes."

"And while heretofore the thief has waited approximately a year between each visit, this time he has waited only a comparatively short time, and has taken two millions away with him instead of one."

"Yes."

"I notice a strange coincidence connected with the numbers of the boxes that have been rifled," said Nick. "That is the coincidence holds good in all save the last theft."

"What is that?"

"The thief began with number ten, then he skipped to fourteen, then to eighteen, and then to twenty-one, going by fours each time. Now, however, he has contented himself by reducing the number skipped. The next one rifled is twenty-five."

"That is true; but what has that to do with it?"

"Probably nothing whatever. It is probably mere chance."

"But what does it mean? What can it mean? How could a thief enter here, Mr. Carter?"

"Through a secret passage that was known to your father and which he neglected to reveal to you. There could be no other way. You must acknowledge that now."

"But why, *why* did he not tell me about it?"

"Doubtless he forgot to do so."

"He was not a man to forget," she said, shaking her head. "And even if it were true that there is a secret entrance to this room from the outside, how would it be possible for any person to discover it?"

"That is the question we are here to answer—but there seems to be only one reply to that, also."

"Can there be any answer to it at all?"

"Yes; one."

"What, Mr. Carter? What is it?"

"The return of one or more of the men who were concerned in the building of this wing for your father."

"But that is next to impossible. At least, it seems incredible."

"Why does it seem incredible?"

"Because he used so many safeguards to obviate that very possibility."

"He has explained those safeguards to you, I suppose?"

"Yes; in detail, and many times."

"And you remember them?"

"Certainly."

"Let us return, then, to the other room and seat ourselves there while you tell me about them."

They did so, and as soon as they were seated, the detective said:

"Now, Miss Lee, tell me as succinctly as you can, all about those safeguards."

"I know——"

"First tell me when this wing of the house was built."

"It was begun four years before my father's marriage, and was completed only a few weeks before I was born."

"And now, tell me what you can about the particulars of the building of it."

"I have already told you that he secured artisans from all parts of the world."

"Yes."

"They were secured in sets, or groups—of course this refers to the time after the heavy part of the work was done; when the wing had really been built, leaving only those portions of it which required the delicate work of the experts to complete."

"Yes."

"These artisans were taken on in groups of two, or three, or four, or five, as the necessity required. To each man was given a certain duty to perform—some specific work to do, and when that was done, the man was liberally paid and sent away."

"And these groups of men—where were they found, usually?"

"They came from all parts of the world; wherever my father could discover the man who could perform what he required—and there were never at one time two men here who came from the same country."

"I understand."

"When there was particular work to be done, such for example, as arranging the catch of that door and its mechanism to connect with a spring under the arm of the chair in which you are seated, that man was brought here alone."

"Well, even so——"

"One moment. We will say that he arrived on a

steamer from Europe on a certain day. He was met at the steamer by Harrison, who was deeper in my father's confidence than any other man."

"Well?"

"Harrison would take him to a hotel and keep him there until night. Then the man would be taken from the hotel in a closed carriage from which every possibility of his seeing or discovering the route over which they should travel, was excluded."

"Yes."

"That carriage would be driven directly here to the house. There was at that time a small building outside, since effaced, into which the carriage was driven. From that small building to the house there was a covered way, and the man would be conducted directly to this wing and shown the work he had to do."

"Yes."

"From the moment of his arrival, until his departure, he never stepped out of doors. He never once knew where he was at all, and when he was through with his part of the work, he was taken away as he came, and he was not once left alone until the ship, on which he was to depart, had sailed."

"And were the groups of twos, and threes, and fours, and fives handled in the same way?"

"In precisely the same way."

"Who stood guardian over them?"

"Harrison was always chief guardian. There were assistants, of course, but the responsibility devolved upon Harrison."

"Were any other precautions that you have not mentioned, taken?"

"Only that the men were kept separated as much as possible. This was all understood by each of them before they were engaged, and as my father paid them exorbitant prices for their labor, they were always ready to acquiesce in any conditions he chose to make. Indeed, they were obliged to do so, if they desired the work at all."

"Anything more?"

"They were fined if they talked among themselves, and they were watched constantly, lest they should do so, notwithstanding the fines."

"Well?"

"You must understand that in work such as this it was rarely that more than two were obliged to labor together, that is near enough together to do any talking. I can assure you, Mr. Carter, that my father placed every imaginable safeguard about this work."

"I do not doubt it."

"And he spared no expense in his efforts."

"But who planned all this work? Who was the engineer-in-chief? Who was the architect?"

"My father."

"What?"

"It is true."

"Is it possible that he possessed the ability to do that?"

"It was because he did possess the ability that he conceived it in the first place."

"I begin to understand better, now."

"His passion was making money, but his favorite occupation was mechanics—the finer mechanics. When we traveled abroad he would spend weeks in Venice, spending thousands of dollars for privileges to examine the old palaces of the doges."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"In the vault that is directly beneath the office, there are boxes there that contain caskets, of workmanship so ancient that time has forgotten when they were made. There are curious locks and springs. There are clockworks of such marvelous workmanship that there is not living a man to-day who could repair one of them. There are—but why go on?"

"And whenever you traveled abroad he passed his time chiefly in the collections of that sort of thing. Is that the idea?"

"Yes; and when once he had found something that he had never seen before, his first occupation, after he had brought it safely here, was to dissect it; to take it apart, piece by piece, and put it together again. I have known him to work years upon one mechanism."

"So, in reality, every piece of mechanism that is connected with this place was planned by him in person?"

"Not only planned by him, but in effect, executed by him, also."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that when there was particularly expert work to do, he supervised it himself."

"Do you mean that he remained away from his business?"

"Not at all. He worked nights and attended to his business during the day, existing on a few hours of sleep."

"And the artisan, whom he had employed on that particular piece of work—what did he do in the meantime?"

"He remained idle until my father called him to work."

"Really, Miss Lee, this all sounds like a tale from the 'Arabian Nights'."

"To me it is all more remarkable than the 'Arabian Nights' ever were, Mr. Carter."

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER SETS A TRAP.

"Have you any idea how many men were employed at different times, upon what we might class as the expert work?" asked the detective.

"In the office, over our heads, there is a list which contains the name of every man who ever did any part of that work. It gives his name, age, place of residence,

regular occupation, and by whom employed at the time he was engaged by my father. It recites the time of his employment, tells the day of his arrival here, and the day of his departure, and describes exactly what work he did while he was here."

"That is excellent. I will inspect that list later on. I think now that we have a clue to work upon."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"Presently. A few more questions first."

"Yes."

"You have every faith and belief in old Harrison, have you?"

"Almost as much faith as I would have in my own father were he alive and here to-day. No shadow of suspicion could fall upon Harrison, Mr. Carter. If he had any use for a million or two million of dollars, he could have them at any moment—and he knows it; he has always known it. Indeed, Mr. Carter, he regards all this as much his as mine, and he is more like a second father to me, than a servant."

"You would even have no hesitation in revealing to Harrison all that you have shown to me, would you?"

"Not the slightest, save that it was my father's direction that these secrets should never be revealed to any person unless some emergency should require it, and then only to you."

For a long time after that the detective remained in what is termed a brown study, with his eyes staring through the door into the third vault at the lifelike body of the dead capitalist.

At last, however, he looked up and met Miriam's eyes fixed upon him.

"I want you to do me a favor, Miss Lee," he said, then.

"You have only to name it, Mr. Carter," she replied.

"I want you to help me to remove every one of those millions from those boxes and to carry them to the room above this one where we will temporarily deposit them in some of the strong boxes there. Will you do that?"

For a moment she appeared to hesitate; and then she replied, frankly, as if she had quite made up her mind:

"Yes; I will do it."

"Then let us get about it at once."

A million dollars in paper money makes quite a parcel, and there were twenty of them to remove. Still, they did not occupy much time in doing it, and when each of the packages had been safely deposited in the upper vault, Miriam inquired:

"And now what are we to do next, Mr. Carter?"

They had returned to the lower vault then, and Nick replied by bidding her to be seated, while he busied himself for a time in the third vault.

Entering there, he arranged the now empty boxes with great care. Next he gave his attention for a moment to the altar, where he busied himself with the cloth of gold blanket that covered it, and then, having looked carefully around him, he returned to the outer vault.

"Now, Miss Lee, if you will explain the mechanism for closing the door, we will ascend to the upper vault."

She did so at once, and strangely enough, it was performed merely by turning one of the legs of the table, with the hand, whereupon the door closed as silently as it had opened, and fitted so perfectly that it left no trace whatever that it was there.

He led the way then to the upper vault, where he requested her to show him the mechanism of opening the stairway from there to the vault beneath, which she had neglected to do when they entered the place, and after that they ascended to the office where the electric lights were still gleaming brightly.

When that was closed, the lights extinguished, and the blinds opened, Nick turned to Miriam with a smile.

"Do you realize that it is after two o'clock?" he asked.

"Is it really?" she exclaimed. "You must be very hungry."

"I will admit that I am."

"Then we will have luncheon at once."

"If you please; and after that I wish you to permit me to descend to the vaults alone for a few moments."

"Why alone, Mr. Carter?"

"Because I do not wish that even you should know what I intend to do there—until later."

"Very well. It shall be as you say," she agreed.

Luncheon was disposed of almost in silence, while they were waited upon by old Harrison, who looked troubled and worried; and at last, when the meal was finished, he called his mistress aside.

"Miss Miriam," he said tremblingly, "there is some trouble, isn't there? Won't you tell old Harrison what it is about?"

"You remember Mr. Carter, don't you, Harrison?" she replied.

"I remember his name. I don't think I ever saw him before."

"But you do remember that my father trusted him, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Miriam."

"Well, Harrison, there is a mystery down-stairs which I have tried in vain to explain. I have asked Mr. Carter to assist me. That is all. My father told me to call upon him if ever I should need anybody."

The old man broke into smiles at once.

"It troubled me," he said simply, and asked no more questions.

When the detective and Miriam had returned to the office-room over the vaults, she asked:

"Do you wish to descend to the vaults at once, Mr. Carter?"

"No," he replied. "I wish first to borrow one of your automobiles for a short trip of ten or fifteen minutes."

She rang the bell at once and gave the necessary order.

"And when you return——" she asked.

"When I return I shall want two white bed-sheets, and then I shall wish to go to the vaults alone for a few moments."

The detective was absent from the house less than a quarter of an hour, and when he returned he found Miriam awaiting him in the office with the sheets he had requested of her.

"Now," he said, "we will close up again, if you don't mind."

"I may sit here in the office and wait for you?"

"Certainly."

"Will you be long?"

"No. Not long."

The great steel door was closed; the lights were turned on; the blinds were drawn, and the portrait-door thrown open.

"Suppose I should shut you down there and refuse to release you without the payment of a ransom?" asked Miriam, with a smile, as he was about to descend.

"I think I could find enough below, to pay it with," he replied.

"But that might not be the sort of ransom I would require," she said, laughing, this time.

"Then, if I could not pay it, I would make use of the secrets you have revealed to me, and come out unaided."

"But there are some secrets that I have not told you."

"What, for instance?"

"I can from here, stop the working of the mechanism so that you could not return if I chose to prevent it."

"Well, in that case I suppose I should have to pay whatever you required. But don't attempt it until after I have unraveled this mysterious web, will you?"

"No; I do not think I shall try it at all."

He was half-way down the stairs when she called to him again.

"Do you know," she said, "that I am devoured by curiosity to know what you intend doing down there?"

"But you can repress it for a little while, can you not?"

"I suppose so."

"I will tell you all about it later."

"If you will promise that, faithfully——"

"I do. You shall accompany me when I go the next time."

"Very well. I must be content with that, I suppose."

The detective had no difficulty in working the mechanism of the vaults with their doors and stairways, and he was soon standing for the second time in front of the open third vault.

He had taken down with him both of the five-light lamps, and to facilitate this Miriam had thrown the sheets over his shoulders, so he looked a weird figure, indeed.

These lamps he now placed side by side on the floor inside the third vault, after which he remained for several moments, studying the ground, so to speak.

Presently, he took the sheets from his shoulders, and one by one carefully spread them over the body of the dead capitalist so that it was completely and thoroughly covered; that, and the couch, and dais upon which it rested.

Next, from one of his pockets he produced a spool of the finest black silk-thread, and then, having arranged the treasure-boxes just as he wanted them—for he moved them about just a little, managing to place nearly all of them so that they could not be opened without first being moved a trifle—he drew a single strand of the thread along each one of the tiers of boxes, and fastened them at either end.

The thread was so fine that a slight touch would break it; and he drew each strand as tightly as he dared to do, lest he sever it himself.

The boxes attended to, he approached the altar.

Here, he first wound the thread several times around the altar itself, and then, by forcing a tack between the tiling of the floor that has already been described, he found a way to carry the thread from the altar to either side of the room; that is, from the altar to the north side and the south side, respectively.

That accomplished, he went through precisely the same operation with the bishop's chair, winding the thread around it in the same manner, and after that, carrying the thread to either side of the room from the chair.

Next, he turned his attention to the sheet-covered form in the middle of the room.

Here, he wound the thread around the whole, lengthwise, and from it led the thread to each of the four corners of the room—and it must be remembered that each thread so stretched was drawn as tightly as it would bear without breaking.

And now, stepping carefully over each of the threads, he withdrew to the doorway again, and regarded his work with a smile.

Then, from another pocket he produced a small bellows and a package of white powder, very light in quality, and having filled the bellows with the powder, he again stepped carefully across the threads he had drawn and began work with this apparatus.

He dusted the powder around every place near the altar; he even dusted the top of the altar itself; and then he passed to the bishop's chair at the other side of the room.

From the bishop's chair to the boxes; from the boxes

to the sheet-covered form in the middle of the room, he went with the bellows and powder, until he was assured that he had neglected no spot that he wished to cover.

And then again he returned to the doorway.

"There," he murmured, "I am of the opinion that when the next person enters that room, that person will not only leave a decided trace of his presence behind him, but he will also indicate quite plainly to me how—or, at least, where—he entered the room. There is a secret entrance here somewhere, and this double trap of mine ought to point out where it is—provided the thief should return."

CHAPTER X.

THE THEORY OF THE CRIME.

When the detective returned to the office above, Miriam greeted him with a smile.

"What an unconscionably long time you have been gone!" she said. "Did you close everything behind you when you came up?"

"Yes. Everything."

"And you will not tell me what you did while you were down there alone?"

"Yes. I set a trap."

"A trap?"

"Exactly."

"What sort of a trap?"

"A trap to catch the man who has stolen your millions."

"Pish!" she said, "I care nothing for the money. It is the desecration of the tomb, and the nullifying of my father's wishes that I object to."

"I understand that perfectly well."

"You will not tell me more about what you did down there?"

"Not at present, Miss Lee. Do you know I have thought you remarkably superior to most women in everything, but I find that you possess one weakness of theirs that is common to all?"

"Curiosity?"

"Yes."

"It was very kind of you, though, to say that you thought me superior in other ways."

"Well, I certainly do."

Miriam was engaged in closing the portrait-door, and opening up the office again while they were talking, and now she asked:

"What is to be done next?"

"I am going to ask you to excuse me for an hour or two while I return to my home."

"But you will return here, won't you?" she exclaimed, in alarm.

"Yes."

"Before dark?"

"I think so. Early in the evening, at least."

"You must promise me that you will do so."

"I promise."

"Thank you."

"While I am gone I wish you would get out and prepare for my inspection that list you described to me; that list of the workmen who were employed here. Will you do that?"

"Certainly. It will be ready when you return."

"And then, when I have returned, I think it will be well if you will go to visit one of your friends for the night."

"Do—*what?*"

"I would like you to go somewhere and pass the night with one of your friends."

"Why, if you please? Why may I not remain in my own house?"

"The conventionalities might not approve."

"I don't think I understand you in the least."

"I wish to remain here all night myself."

"Bother the conventionalities. I shall remain here, and I will watch with you, too, if you will permit it."

"I certainly shall not do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, there are many reasons. One is that I think you might tire out before the watching is done."

"Oh, I have sat up all night, often."

"This watch may last through a dozen nights, or thirty nights, or three hundred nights. It may take a year."

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going to keep vigil here until this mystery is solved?"

"I mean exactly that. I never permit anything to beat me if I can help it."

"That is *very* good of you, Mr. Carter, and I thoroughly appreciate it; but do you suppose for a moment that I will consent to remain away from my house all that time?"

"No; it occurred to me that you might secure the services of a chaperon by to-morrow."

Miriam threw back her head and laughed aloud; a merry laugh it was, too.

"Of all the things——" she said at last. "Pray, what do I want with chaperons, or what do I care for the conventionalities, Mr. Carter? They concern me not at all. Old Harrison has been chaperon for me all my life, and I think he is competent to fill the bill, still."

"It shall be as you say, of course."

"Then hear what I say."

"Yes."

"I shall wait dinner for you; of, rather, I will order

dinner served at any hour that you will name. After dinner we will go over those lists together, for I think that possibly I may be of some assistance in that particular."

"I regard that as extremely probable."

"I wish you would tell me what your theory is in regard to that list, Mr. Carter."

"I have no objection to doing that."

"Now? Will you tell me, now?"

"Yes."

"Well, then?"

"In the first place, Miss Lee, skilled hands mean also skilled brains. Any artisan who is sufficiently skilful to perform the work that your father assigned to many of them, is also smart enough to put two and two together."

"Yes. Well?"

She was regarding him eagerly while he talked. She had seated herself in one of the big leather-covered chairs of the office, and he stood in front of her, prepared to take his departure.

"You must understand, to begin with, that there exists not the slightest doubt that there *is* a secret entrance to the vaults through what we call the third vault."

"Yes. I have forced myself to accept that idea."

"Very well, then, the man who assisted your father in making that secret entrance and in fashioning the mechanism to work it, must have been little less than a fool if he did not understand perfectly well for what it was intended."

"Yes."

"He knew, for example, that he was assisting in the creation *of an outside entrance to a place where some sort of treasure was to be stored.*"

"I understand you."

"He also knew that the storehouse was located somewhere in or near the city of New York. He had agreed to come and go under certain conditions; *but you must remember that he worked with your father, and therefore, that he knew Burleigh Lee perfectly well by sight.*"

"I see. I see now what you mean."

"After he had sailed away from here at the expiration of his labors, there was nothing to prevent his return. Patience and watching would one day bring him in sight of the great capitalist with whom he had worked on that underground passage."

"Yes, yes."

"Once he saw your father, it would be an easy matter to trace him to his home. That done, he knew where the treasure-vaults were located."

"But you forget that no one man of all of them knew enough to have worked one of the mechanisms without aid."

"No; I do not forget that. That is exactly what I am getting at. You must remember that it is between twenty and twenty-five years since that man—if I am correct—was employed here."

"Well, what does that prove?"

"It proves first that he attempted for a long time to gain access to the vaults alone and unaided, and that at last he discovered it to be impossible."

"Now, I lose you again."

"What could he do then in order to carrry out his purpose? Plainly, there was only one thing that he could do, and that was to find other workmen who had been engaged on the building of the vaults."

"Ah!"

"He realized that he could never accomplish anything at all alone. So, he set out to find others of the workmen. We will say that he returned to Europe. That he advertised in every capital of the continent.

"He could have worded such an advertisement so that only those who really were employed here would understand. Ultimately, if he was patient and persevering, he would receive an answer or answers. There are a thousand reasons why that would be so."

"For instance——"

"A workman returning to his home from such employment, would talk about it among his acquaintances. He would in one sense become a hero among them. The fact of his having had the strange experience would be known throughout the neighborhood in which he lived."

"Yes."

"Somebody among his acquaintances would see that advertisement. They would report it to him and advise him to answer it. Now do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Suppose, for example, that there were thirty of those workmen scattered over Europe at the time of the advertisement; the man advertising could safely depend upon receiving answers from a third of them; don't you think so?"

"Yes, I should think so."

"Well, there you are. There is the whole plot."

"But why—if I may use a very common expression—why didn't they clean out the whole place the first time they came here, instead of taking only a little?"

"Because, my dear Miss Lee, rogues are rogues, even among themselves."

"I don't, in the least, know what you mean now."

"Suppose there are three of these conspirators altogether."

"Well?"

"The master mind among them all, and the one who takes the lead, is naturally the one who conceived the project. It is no part of his plan that the others shall have as much of the loot as himself. He doubtless made the first visit to the place alone and, having secured the one million that was taken first, or the two millions, if they took that much, he returned to his friends and divided it among them, intending after he had gotten rid of them all to return and become a master of millions himself—alone."

"I follow you now."

"But that was not to be. They spent their money, or frittered it away, or gambled with it, and when it was gone they returned for more. They took another million. Now the thing has been repeated, and still more millions are missing—and I have no doubt that now he has satisfied them.

"He has taken the amount of five million dollars—twenty-five million francs, if they happen to be Swiss, or French. It is a vast sum. They are probably led to believe it is all. The master mind among them is at last satisfied that he has rid himself of the others, and soon he will return to claim all that remains."

"And he will find nothing—nothing, because we have removed it all."

"Oh, yes, he will find *something* when he arrives, but not the millions."

"What shall he find?"

"He will find me, I hope. If not, I will find him."

"Do you mean that you think you have discovered the secret entrance?"

"No; but I have no doubt at all that I will find it—when the time comes."

"Mr. Carter, what in the world would I have done without you?"

"You would have lost twenty-five millions instead of five, Miss Lee," said the detective, with a smile; "and I have hopes, as it is, that you have not lost quite five."

CHAPTER XI.

ON GUARD OVER THE THIRD VAULT.

While the detective was riding to his home in Miriam Lee's automobile, he was deep in thought over the events of the day.

Now that he was away from the house and on his way through the streets of New York in the late afternoon, all of the romance and the medieval atmosphere of the affair was taken out of him, and he speedily got down to hard facts.

He doubted, now that he thought the matter over calmly, if he had done wisely in setting the trap he did in the third vault. He began to think that it would have been wiser to have waited and watched, for years, if necessary, in order to catch the criminals red-handed.

However, Nick Carter was very much given to sticking to his first impressions, and he resolved that he would leave the trap as he had set it, at least for a few days, and that then, if it had not worked at all, that he would destroy it and resort to the other expedient.

As the matter eventually worked out, he had done the very wisest thing that could have been done—but he could not know that just then.

Chick met him at the door when he entered the house, and was all eagerness to know what had kept his chief at the Lee mansion so long a time.

"Sorry, Chick, very," said Nick, in reply to his questions, "but for the present I cannot tell you anything at all save that this is the strangest case I ever had."

And the assistant had to be satisfied with that.

By Miriam Lee's order, her chauffeur waited for Nick until he was prepared to return to her house, and a little after six o'clock they started back again.

The detective had gone to the Lee mansion that morning unprepared to undertake any extensive researches. His pockets were not at that time as well provided with the accessories he usually carried, as they should have been; that was one reason why he chose to return.

Another was that he wished to tell Chick that he might be away indefinitely, and that the reply to all inquiries concerning him was to be merely that he was absent, and that it was not known when he would return.

Now, having given that direction, and having supplied himself with everything he thought he might require, no matter what the emergency should be, he hurried back to the great house on the hill, for he was as eager to get at the bottom of the mystery as Miriam herself.

He found her awaiting him in the library.

"Dinner will be served at once," she told him, with her greeting; "and I have those lists all ready for your inspection. I have looked them over myself."

"And with what results?"

"I will tell you that when we look at them together."

"I hope you did not put the time-lock on the door for too long an interval, Miss Lee."

"I did not put it on at all. I could not tell at what hour you might wish to go into the office again."

"That is right."

Dinner was rather a silent affair between the two, for both were preoccupied.

More than that, they did not care to discuss the matters that interested them in the presence of the stately footman who served them, while old Harrison fluttered around near at hand with a watchful eye for their mutual comfort.

But it came to an end at last, and at once, by common consent, they took their way in silence toward that mysterious wing of the house where so much had happened and was still to happen.

Old Harrison tottered after them, and at the door he said:

"Can I be of any service at all, Miss Miriam?"

"No, thank you, Harrison; not unless you will consent to retire at once to your own room and take your comfort for the rest of the night. You may have the front gate locked, and tell the porter that nobody is to be admitted under any pretext, and you may have the mission-room prepared for Mr. Carter."

And so Harrison went his way, and Nick Carter and Miriam were left alone together with their mystery.

Without more ado, they locked themselves inside the office, and drew the great steel blinds.

"I feel as if I were a deep conspirator," said Miriam, as she seated herself at one side of the table and directed Nick to sit opposite her.

"I have something of that sensation myself," admitted the detective. "Among all my cases, Miss Lee, I have never had one in which I felt such a keen interest as I do in this."

"I must also confess to some enthusiasm about it," she replied. "I do not feel as if it were my case. I am an outsider who is assisting you."

"I am glad that you do feel that way. Now, what are these?"

"They are all of the books which relate to the building of this wing of the house."

"What! All of these. Great Scott, I haven't got to go through all those, have I?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "Only this one. This is the list."

"Yes."

"You asked me a moment ago what I had discovered, or something like it, and I replied that I would tell you when we came to this room. Well, I have found the name of the man you want."

"What?"

"I mean, of course, the name of the man who assisted in the very last part of the work on the third vault."

"There is no mention anywhere, is there, of the secret entrance to that vault?"

"No; but my father seems to have placed some particular emphasis on what he enters here under the title of 'The Last Work On the Small Chamber.'"

"That is exactly what we want."

"Very well. There are three men mentioned, particularly, as engaged on that work."

"And how is it that you think you have selected the very one that I want?"

"Because I selected the one who did the very last work, and because my father made a note after his name, too."

"What is that note? That remark made by your father?"

"It is very characteristic of my father. It reads: 'This chap is a natural-born scoundrel. I regret that I employed him at all.'"

"That does seem to indicate something. Now what is the name of the man?"

"Jean Gevrais."

"Will you let me take the book, please, and look it over alone? Thank you. I may smoke?"

"All you please. I told you that this morning."

"Really, now that I think of it, I don't believe I have smoked since then."

"No. Remain where you are. I will wait upon you."

For considerably more than an hour after that the detective remained poring over the list of names contained in the book before him, and he was astounded by the completeness of its arrangement.

But at last he put it aside and joined Miriam over near the fire.

'It is now half-past nine o'clock," he said to her, as

he drew the chair forward, and put a flaming match to a fresh cigar. "When I have finished this cigar I am 'going below,' as a sailor would say."

"And I am going with you," she replied.

"Certainly, if you desire to do so."

"Do you think that under the circumstances I could remain here and wait?"

"Well, no," he laughed. "Judging you by the few hours of acquaintance we have had, I should say that that would be about the last thing that you could do. You might, if I tied you."

And so they laughed and chatted together during the three-quarters of an hour which Nick occupied in consuming the cigar in question.

A few moments later, as they were about to descend the stairs to the first vault, the detective said to her:

"Miss Lee, I am about to make an almost impossible request of you."

"Indeed! What can it be?"

"I am going to ask you to utter no word or sound after we descend to the lower vault."

"Goodness! Am I as talkative as all that?"

"No, no, but it is difficult to keep entirely silent when one is under the influence of excitement, and I can see that you feel the excitement of this moment."

"Say rather, exhilaration. It is not excitement so much as it is keen interest."

"Very well. You will keep silent?"

"Certainly."

"And consent to sit in the dark as well?"

"I place myself entirely under your orders."

"Then I have one very important order to give you. It is a precautionary one, but it is vital in case anything should happen."

"What is it?"

"You are to sit in the chair where you sat this morning, and *no matter what happens, you are to remain there.* Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," she replied mockingly.

"This is no joke, Miss Lee. It is true that we might remain down there on guard for a year, or for the rest of our lives without being disturbed—and it is also true that we may be disturbed before we have been there three hours. I have a feeling—an intuition, I suppose—that something will happen to-night, and I found myself doubting the wisdom of taking you with me."

"Then stop doubting if that is the case."

"You must not forget, Miss Lee, that if we are disturbed, that if I should hear noises, or anything which will lead me to open that door into the third chamber, the man, or men, whom I will find there, will be desperate ones."

"I will remember."

"And you will obey me about keeping in your chair?"

"I have said that I am under your orders. But, Mr. Carter, you seem to forget one thing."

"What is that?"

"You talk as if you thought you could hear, in the lower chamber, any noise, slight noise I mean, that might occur in the third vault."

"I can, with this little instrument," he said, holding up a tubelike affair that resembled a stethescope. "I shall lie on my face on the floor near the door, and with this against the floor at the base of the door, I could hear the slightest sound that occurred on the opposite side of it."

"Really?"

And now the detective enjoined silence, and then descended the second flight of stairs to the lower chamber or vault.

The detective placed the lights on the table within reach of Miriam's hand, and directed her to take the seat he had occupied that morning. Then he gave her a code of signals which he made with his tongue.

There were only two of these signals, but they were important.

One click of his tongue meant that she was to raise the lever which would open the door into the third vault. Two clicks of his tongue meant that she was to turn on the lights.

"Now," he said to her, in a very low tone, "I shall stretch myself on the floor against that wall with my head directly at the spot where the door will swing open if you work the lever. That is so that I may dodge the door and allow it to swing past me."

"I understand."

"The door works so silently that I doubt if I can hear it open as near as I will be to it, but you must not fail to work the lever if you hear the signal."

"I will not."

"And, having worked the lever, you must keep absolutely still, and listen for my other signal for the lights."

"I will do so."

"Then I think we are ready to proceed. It may be a

long and tedious wait and no doubt you will drop asleep in your——"

"I will *not* drop asleep, sir."

And so the waiting, which was to be very short, began.

CHAPTER XII.

UNCOVERING A MYSTERY.

It is a difficult matter to keep anything like an accurate account of time when one is waiting in silence and in the dark, and hence, Nick Carter had very little idea how long he had been stretched upon the floor of that silent chamber with his audiscope held tightly against his ear, when he was startled by a distinct sound from the interior of the third vault.

He could not tell what it was, only that it suggested a suppressed curse; and he thought it wise to listen for a repetition of it.

For several minutes, however, there was no sound whatever, and then, as suddenly as the first noise had come to him, he heard the second.

This time there was no mistaking it. It was a curse, or an exclamation that was very like one.

Instantly after that, there were voices, as if two men were conversing in low tones, and the detective waited no longer, but instantly drawing back his head and rising to his feet, he gave the signal for Miriam to open the door.

Slowly it swung back; slowly and silently; and the two men who now occupied the third vault and who stood facing each other as if they were about to leap at each other's throats, each with a candle in one hand and a long and gleaming knife in the other—those two men had no idea that they had suddenly been uncovered.

They could not hear the door open, and they stood facing each other so that they could not see that it had swung backward on its hinges.

But the appearance and aspect of the two men was not all that was startling about the panorama, for the opening of the door had also revealed the location of the secret entrance to the third vault.

It was the altar which had concealed the entrance.

Now, as the detective and Miriam viewed it from the darkness in which they were concealed, they saw that it had risen to the ceiling of the chamber, and that it was supported underneath by a steel shaft around which a spiral staircase twined through an opening in the floor.

And so we can understand that, even if the detective had not returned in time to interrupt the scene that was now taking place, the silk threads he had arranged, and the powder he spread must have led him ultimately to a discovery of the secret.

But he gave no thought to that now. He was interested in what was taking place before him.

The two men who faced each other in the third vault, were talking violently in French, and as the door swung open, one of them said to the other:

"You have lied to us. There is a great fortune here."

"There is not," was the reply. "I have taken it all."

"Then why do you return here again?"

"Because it is my pleasure."

"There is a great fortune here, I say."

"There is not."

"What is contained in those rows of boxes?"

"Nothing at all." (He did not know that he spoke truth).

"I think that you lie. What is under that sheet?"

"A corpse. Sacre! That is what startled me when I entered."

"Was the corpse not here before?"

"Yes; but not the sheet."

"Again I ask you what is contained in those boxes?"

"Nothing, I tell you."

"I shall have a look myself."

"Do so, then, and be satisfied."

The last speaker stepped back as if to permit the other to pass him to examine the boxes and then, as he did so, the villain struck him with his knife, and they grappled as they fell to the floor together, each fighting desperately.

One of them was already severely wounded, but he fought none the less fiercely, nevertheless.

Just at the instant when they fell to the floor, Nick Carter gave Miriam the signal to turn on the lights, which she did at once, flooding the place with a light so brilliant after the intense darkness that it almost blinded the eyes.

The effect of the illumination upon the two men who were fighting was remarkable.

Each of them uttered a scream of fright, and each attempted to tear himself from the grasp of the other, and to gain his feet.

It was plain, also, that it was their intention to make for the spiral stairway with all speed.

But as one of them leaped to his feet, and the other one—the wounded man—managed to prop himself into a sitting posture, they saw that a man with a revolver in either hand barred the way of their escape, for Nick Carter had leaped into the chamber and had placed himself between the two men and the opening in the floor under the altar.

Just here the wounded man fainted sheer away, but whether from the effects of his wound, or from terror, it would be hard to say. At all events, he keeled over senseless at the feet of his companion.

But the other man—the man upon his feet—the man who had treacherously stabbed his companion in crime, was not so easily frightened.

With a snarl of rage, and notwithstanding the revolvers in Nick Carter's hands, he leaped toward this new enemy, hurling himself at the detective's throat with all the impetuosity of a wild animal.

Nick did not wish to kill him; neither did he wish to discharge his revolver in that place—and he had no fear but that he could easily overcome this man.

He met the attack, therefore, with his foot; that is, he kicked the man on the wrist when he would have struck with his knife, and so dashed the weapon from his hands.

Then, releasing the pistols from his grasp—they were the two small ones that he always carried in his sleeves when he thought he might have need of them—he seized the Frenchman in his terrible grasp and dragged him bodily out into the larger chamber.

There, in spite of the frantic struggles of the fellow, he held him at arm's length while he backed him slowly across the room toward Miriam.

The Frenchman, feeling himself in the grasp of a giant against whom he had no sort of chance, ceased to struggle and became sullen; and it was then that Nick said to him quietly:

"You are Jean Gevrais."

"Sacre! Mon Dieu!" groaned the Frenchman; and he turned livid to the lips while now, indeed, he almost fainted. Then he muttered in his own tongue:

"I have not borne that name in fifteen years."

"But you *are* Jean Gevrais?"

"Yes."

"And you have robbed this tomb of five million dollars."

"Yes."

"Where is that money now? Where is it, I say?"

"I have almost three millions of it, monsieur; the rest has been dissipated," he replied humbly.

"How many men besides yourself have been concerned in these robberies? Quick! Tell me before I choke you, Jean Gevrais!"

"Three only. That one there, and two others, monsieur."

"And where are the others? Quick!"

"One of them is dead. The other is dying of a sickness at the hospital. I saw him but to-night, and they told me he could not live."

"You poisoned him, Jean Gevrais. *Confess!*"

"Mercy! Mercy, monsieur! I poisoned him. Yes. And I killed the other. I could not find this one. I wanted all the rest of the wealth for myself. I wanted it, oh, how I wanted it!"

"And those millions—almost three—where are they hidden?"

"They are there—in the shaft—unless Gustave—— But no. He followed me here. He must have passed them."

With a quick motion Nick whirled the man around and threw him on his face on the floor. Then, kneeling upon him, he manacled him by wrist and ankle so that he was utterly helpless.

After that he hastened to the other man, who was slowly recovering consciousness, and directing Miriam to precede him with the lights, he carried him to the office-room of the wing.

There he bandaged the man's wounds as best he could, and having stopped the bleeding, he placed the fellow on the couch.

"He will do very well for the present," he said to Miriam. "I don't think he can live. but whether he does or not, there is something else for me to do just now. Will you come with me, or will you remain here, Miss Lee?"

"I shall go with you. Uch! I wouldn't remain here for all the world! Not at the present moment."

And so the detective, followed by Miriam, descended again into the vaults.

Gevrais had not moved; he was too greatly terrorized for that. The use of his right name, which he had abandoned for fifteen years, had thoroughly unnerved him.

But Nick paid no attention to him whatever. He made

his way directly to the spiral stairs, directing Miriam to wait for him where she was.

It was a well-like hole through which the shaft descended, and at a distance of ten feet from the floor of the vault, it opened upon a gallery which had been excavated through the solid rock for a considerable distance, where there was a second spiral stairway around another shaft, and ascending this, Nick found himself within the inclosure of a stone summer-house in one corner of the grounds.

And here, a stone table, not unlike the altar in the vault in shape, served precisely the same purpose; and, being open, it was plainly to be seen how the secret passage was used, and how the mechanism was worked.

Releasing the spring that held the stone table in the air, and allowing it to settle in place, Nick returned to Miriam, discovering on his way, as Gevrais had said he would, the three packages of money, one of which had been despoiled of nearly half.

These he carried back with him, and having returned to the chamber above, he lowered the altar to its place.

Shall we tell you how the man Gustave finally died of the wound he received from Gevrais? Is it necessary to state that Gevrais was himself executed for the murder of his three partners in crime? And how the secret entrance through the summer-house was filled from one end to the other with cement in order that it might never be used again? All these statements would be true.

Nick Carter persuaded Miriam to make no more million-dollar deposits in the tomb of the dead, and he persuaded her also to seal that tomb forever—and she persuaded him to accept one of the packages as his fee.

THE END.

The next issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 494, will contain "The Mysterious Treasure Hunters; or, Nick Carter's Bargain With a Crook."

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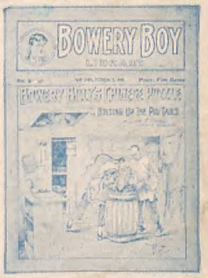

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